

## DECISION MAKING IN AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT\*

VINCENT J. DEL CASINO JR.

One day in 1996 I made a choice to study the development of outreach programs for people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) in Thailand. As an ethnographer, I weighed social location and distance in relation to the field and its occupants. I grappled with the partiality of the research process. More difficult to consider was how hard it is to make choices that cut off one avenue of research while opening up another. I failed to think through how ethnographers make decisions subconsciously and “on the fly” when confronted with challenges and unexpected issues.

Making choices, consciously and unconsciously, forced me to regard the constant state of flux in my research and the people that it involved. Certain people became central in my life; others grew marginal. As Michael Angrosino and Kimberly Mays de Pérez point out, “Ethnographers and their collaborators do not step into fixed and fully determined positions; rather, their behaviors and expectations of each other are part of a dynamic process that continues to grow” (2000, 683). I had to make decisions about what my relationships with others around me should be and could be.

I made many decisions while conducting dissertation research in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and in this essay I examine how some of those both closed off and opened up opportunities for geographical inquiry. I discuss location and positionality, and social and physical distance, as they informed the research process. Fieldwork is always affected by choices made in the research process, which begins before we enter the field and continues as we attempt to describe, interpret, and analyze the data we collect (Wolcott 1994).

### DECISION ONE: STUDYING AIDS IN THAILAND

My research began with my decision to study Thailand and its burgeoning AIDS crisis. A general interest in Asia started in high school and intensified in college. Attempting to gain some sort of understanding, I began to study Asian culture and society, Japanese, and Buddhism. My undergraduate experience with political-economic and Marxist theory led me to study not developed Japan but the developing world of Southeast Asia. Thailand came to be my area of study when, in graduate school, Thai was the only mainland Southeast Asian language taught yearly.

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✉ DR. DEL CASINO is an assistant professor of geography and liberal studies at California State University, Long Beach, California 90840-1101.